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TAGS: PGOV KDEM KIRF VE PL

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ REFUSES FORMER POLISH PRESIDENT WALESA'S
VISIT AGAIN

REF: A. 08 CARACAS 1559

1B. 08 WARSAW 1312

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: With five days to go until the February 15 constitutional referendum on removing official term limits, Chavez is trying to marginalize and discredit any potential critics. He has again denied democracy activist and former Polish President Lech Walesa entrance into Venezuela -- as he did prior to the November 2008 state and local elections. He has also accused the organized criminal pro-government "La Piedrita" group of being infiltrated and financed by the CIA. His outlandish and implausible claims inevitably include an attempt to pin the blame for all negative events on the political opposition and/or the United States. End Summary.

CHAVEZ PROHIBITS WALESA'S VISIT

12. (SBU) Chavez announced February 10 that former Polish President Lech Walesa would not be allowed into Venezuela. During an evening broadcast of a Cabinet meeting by state TV station Venezolana de Television (VTV), Chavez turned to Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolas Maduro and instructed him to prohibit the entrance of Walesa into Venezuela. He contended that "we are obliged to respect Venezuela's dignity" and alleged that the Polish leader's trip was part of a "reformatted" plan to incite political violence. Walesa had told pro-opposition daily El Nacional earlier that day that he was willing to meet with Chavez or any other government official in order to bring Venezuela "closer to democracy." Walesa, who was invited to visit by several civil society groups, also noted that he hoped to meet with university activists during his trip.

13. (SBU) In the run-up to Venezuela's state and local elections in November 2008, Walesa strongly criticized Chavez in media interviews, contending that Poland's experience with communism should be a warning and that the GBRV is "the biggest mistake of the region." Chavez discouraged Walesa from a planned visit to Venezuela on November 2, citing the GBRV's inability to provide sufficient security (Reftels). Walesa won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 and served as President of Poland from 1990-95.

CHAVEZ LINKS "LA PIEDRITA" TO CIA

14. (SBU) In the same February 10 broadcast, Chavez announced that the organized criminal pro-government group

"La Piedrita" had been infiltrated by the CIA and was working to undermine his government. He contended that the group was "financed and infiltrated by the ultra-right and they are using it against the government, against the revolution, against the people, and should be neutralized." He went on to blast the opposition for allegedly resorting to violence, violating Venezuelan laws and the Constitution, and planning to reject the "probable" approval of the referendum on February 15.

¶5. (SBU) Chavez also accused the opposition media of using the January 31 attacks on Caracas' oldest synagogue to spur a "religious war" by implicating pro-government supporters in the violence. (Comment: Chavez and government spokesmen initially blamed the political opposition for staging the attack. End Comment.) The state-owned Bolivarian News Agency published an article February 11 calling the BGRV the "guarantor of respect" for religious freedom. Venezuelan Ambassador to the UN Jorge Valero, on the February 10 edition of VTV's "Wake-up Venezuela," repudiated the synagogue attacks and echoed Chavez's criticism of the opposition.

¶6. (C) Comment: Chavez is once again carefully calibrating his actions to best exploit the political environment, probably calculating that La Piedrita's violence has generated public indignation. Similarly, Walesa's visit would have been likely to draw attention to the "No" campaign, particularly its vibrant base of student activists, during the finale of a very tense campaign season. End Comment.

CAULFIELD